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'Recycled' drinking water may get look (with poll)

By Erica Meltzer
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Four months ago, voters were urged to reject a ban on "toilet-to-tap" water delivery as unnecessary because the practice already is illegal in Arizona.

But Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said last week that using "recycled" wastewater as part of the drinking-water supply needs to be studied as part of the region's long-term future.

Huckelberry said there is no proposal on the table, but city and county planners cannot afford to ignore possible future water supplies.

"There's no proposal to do anything. The job of planners is to think long-term, and thinking long-term means getting more use out of our wastewater," he said.

Pima County and the city of Tucson are about to embark on a joint regional water study that will include an inventory of water and wastewater infrastructure, current and future water supply and demand, and ways that cooperation could benefit both sides.

City and county officials suggested locating wastewater plants to help ease the expansion of the reclaimed-water system, saying it is one way that Tucson Water and the Pima County Regional Wastewater Reclamation Department could work together.

The City Council already has approved the scope of work for the study, and the county Board of Supervisors is set to vote on it Tuesday.

In a memo before the vote, Huckelberry cited advances in the treatment of wastewater in urging greater use be made of "recycled water."

"A substantial investment is being made to significantly improve the water quality of reclaimed water, making it more reusable as recycled water," Huckelberry wrote. "It will be important that this billion-dollar investment be productively used to increase the region's water supply over the next 20 years."

Currently, reclaimed water is used only for watering grass at parks and golf courses.

In his memo, Huckelberry did not refer directly to using treated effluent as a potable water supply, but he attached a summary, prepared at his request, of cities and counties that do reuse reclaimed water to supply drinking water.

One town, Cloudcroft, N.M., further cleans its reclaimed water through a reverse osmosis process before mixing it with well and spring water for delivery in the potable supply.

The town built its $2 million water-reuse system last year after drying wells and low flows in springs cast doubt on its long-term water supply.

Scottsdale has recharged treated effluent into its drinking water aquifer since 1999.

Arizona state law currently bans direct delivery of treated effluent for drinking water, but it allows treated effluent to be recharged.

Some water lawyers believe that if effluent were treated to drinking-water standards or above, it could be delivered without a change in state law, but state regulators disagree.

Last year, Tucson activist John Kromko put forward Proposition 200, a ballot initiative that would have barred the delivery of treated effluent to homes and the recharge of treated effluent into groundwater. Kromko characterized both practices as "toilet-to-tap."

Members of the No on 200 campaign attacked Kromko for raising fears about a practice they said was already illegal.

No on 200 spokeswoman Carol Zimmerman, in an e-mail to an Arizona Daily Star reporter before the election, wrote: "This issue is nothing but a red herring that Kromko uses to alarm people and to get them to sign petitions. This is already fully covered in state law."

Proposition 200 was defeated by 72 percent of the voters.
Larry Hecker, who headed up the No on 200 campaign, said no one with the campaign ever promised voters that treated wastewater wouldn't end up in the drinking-water supply.

"What I said is under the current state law, toilet-to-tap was not permissible," Hecker said.

Hecker said he believes city and county officials should look at all options.

"It's a debate that's going on in other communities," he said. "I'm not an expert on potable-water supplies, and I think it's prudent to look at all options.

"The public, if it feels it's unsafe, is going to be very outspoken," he added.

But Kromko said he believes the public was misled.

"Six months ago, it was illegal, and now they're looking at it," he said.

But he said he's not surprised that it came up for discussion.

"The fact is Tucson Water has known about that for a long time," he said, referring the city water utility's 50-year plan, which acknowledges the possible expanded use of effluent.

"If we stop growth soon enough, we will never have to do this, but the time for doing that is soon," Kromko said.

In her summary of communities relying on treated effluent for drinking water, Pima County Water Policy Manager Kathleen Chavez said all the communities that do so have an integrated water-and-wastewater system, unlike Pima County, where the city controls the water utility and the county controls the sewer system.

But Huckelberry said unification isn't necessary for cooperation — only better communication. And Supervisor Richard Elías, chairman of the board, said any talk of a regional water authority is premature.

Elías said he never would vote for a system that allowed treated effluent into the drinking water supply, but all options need to be studied.

Also framing the debate are alarming reports about the possibility of long-term drought in the West and the appearance of flushed and excreted pharmaceuticals in drinking water supplies, including in aquifers.

Last month, scientists with San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography said there is a 50 percent chance that Lake Mead will be dry by 2021,

endangering the region's supply of Central Arizona Project water that currently replaces the groundwater pumped for drinking.

And last week, The Associated Press reported that a wide range of pharmaceuticals — from antibiotics to sex hormones to mood stabilizers — has shown up in drinking water supplies around the country, including in Tucson.

Huckelberry said technology for treating wastewater is improving all the time, and by the time Tucson policymakers have to make a decision, treated effluent might be cleaner than the water we drink today.

"The first priority is to get every turf application on reclaimed water," he said. "The last component is whether it becomes part of the drinking-water supply, and that won't take place for another 20 years. We need all the options available. Whether it happens is a whole other policy decision for the elected officials that control the water entity."